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ABSTRACT

As an emotional topic, concern with acceptable usage of language has never been far from the public consciousness, but the public's willingness to abide by educators' views on the necessity of teaching usage rules has varied over the years. The situation we face is not a new one--the eighteenth century saw the initial widespread concern with correctness in language and the subsequent development of grammars and dictionaries that specified in some detail which parts of the language were deteriorating and then specified rules and regulations for stopping that deterioration. The 1886 high school grammar book, "Higher Lessons," by A. Reed and B. Kellogg further perpetuated the study of grammar and introduced the diagraming of sentences. Through the 1930s and 1940s, English educators became more accepting of the view that usage was really a matter of appropriateness. During the 1950s, teacher training followed the development of grammatical theory, from traditional to structural to transformational grammar. More recently, sociolinguistic research makes it clear that questions of usage are trivial--real writing problems have little to do with a knowledge of grammar. A return to the basics, however, calls for a return to traditional grammar. English teachers can construe "back to the basics" to mean that future students must be more knowledgeable about language and understand the difference between grammar and usage. (HOD)

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USAGE: OR BACK TO BASICS: AN OLD SAW RESHARPENED

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Professional language students learn very early to distinguish between grammar and usage. Grammar is what Chomsky and other theoreticians do; it is the description of the structure of the language or a theory of language. Usage is what Edwin Newman or William Safire does; they choose among the correct or incorrect forms of those available in the current dialects of English. Although linguists make this distinction, the general public does not. All grammar is either correct or incorrect. Unfortunately, a good many teachers share the public's view, not the linguists'. When we get right down to it, many linguists believe in correctness too. I can remember a number of my colleagues, even linguists who were by choice sociclinguists, applauding Edwin Newman's first public diatribe, Strictly Speaking, saying we really needed to pay more attention to that sort of thing. Whatever our training, we must recognize that the matter of usage is not a logical one, one to be solved through logical presentation of facts and knowledge. It is an emotional issue on a par with questions such as the legitimacy of abortion. Logic does not prevail, belief does.

As an emotional topic, concern with acceptable usage of language has never been far from the public consciousness, but the public's willingness to abide by educators' views on the necessity of teaching usage rules has varied over the years. For the past ten or twenty years, parents have been willing to let the schools decide what children should be taught and what could be bypassed in English classes. This benign

neglect seems to be passing away. I predict that in the future we English teachers will be pressured to adjust our concerns in teaching composition from our current focus on what the student writes to a narrower focus on how the student writes. We are being asked to return to the basics, and part of that return will be a return to teaching more and more usage rules of the preposition-at-the-end-of-the-sentence sort.

The addition of the Standard Written English Test to the SAT is one of the early indications of this demand. The ETS people claim that the SWET is as good a measure of writing ability as the essay which they included some years ago under pressure from writing teachers throughout the United States. We are familiar with the declining scores on the SAT test, both math and verbal, and the public outcry that has accompanied that decline. Teachers, of course, are blamed for the decline, and no matter what answers we give to the accusation, we are still held at fault. At this point, it seems that whatever the cause, general societal permissiveness, bad teaching, bad students, unconcerned parents, changing views of what students should be learning, no matter what the cause, we, the teachers, will be held responsible. The result will be, quite simply, that we must alter what we teach to satisfy the demands of the taxpayer, the parent with children in the schools.

The interesting questions that arise from the situation are how the situation arose and how we should respond. As a way of answering those questions, I will show how the demand for usage teaching has come and gone in the past, with the hope that understanding that will enable us

to respond constructively to the demands of our students' parents. I, as many of you, enjoy or suffer the position of being parent, teacher, and trainer of teachers simultaneously, a position which affords the opportunity for unique insights.

First, we must remember that the situation we face is not a new one. The 18th century saw the initial widespread concern with correctness in language and the subsequent development of grammars and dictionaries which specified in some detail which parts of the language were deteriorating and then specified rules and regulations for stopping that deterioration. The neo-classicists can be blamed only for establishing the concern as one important to English. Concern for such deterioration stretches back at least as far as Dionysus Thrax who wrote the Art of Grammar around 100 B.C. in order to prevent the same deterioration of the Greek language of the time. Even in the 18th century, speakers and writers of English resisted efforts at standardization -- our ancestors refused to institute an academy on the French model to control the course of our language. In fact, in his grammar of 1763, Joseph Priestly held that usage was what people did, not what scholars thought they should do. Even Samuel Johnson changed the conservative view expressed in his Plan for the Dictionary to a sadder but more liberal view in the Preface to the Dictionary.

The struggle, then, is an old and continuing one. Late in the 19th century, A. S. Hill (a gentleman I found reposing at the bottom of a pile of old books in a junk shop) was torn by the same problems we face

and said, ". . . it follows that the methods of teaching in our schools are radically defective: for a sound method would prevent both the sacrifice of substance to form, and that of form to substance; a sound method would teach a young writer to beware both of purchasing correctness of expression by dullness, and of trying to secure interest at the cost of accuracy." (p. 8) (A professor of rhetoric at Harvard, Hill first expressed these thoughts in Harper's Monthly Magazine.) He finally chooses to teach usage first, then strive for interest.

We can turn as well to the high school grammar books used during the period, such as Alonzo Reed's and Brainerd Kellogg's Higher Lessons in English, one of the most popular texts and one which heavily influenced subsequent texts. When we think of diagramming sentences, the diagrams are those of Reed and Kellogg. In their "Preface," Reed and Kellogg note: that some people, both educated and uneducated, have asked for the banishment of grammar from the schools, that the "majority of thoughtful, practical teachers have never doubted the utility of the study of English grammar," and that "the oral instruction, the composition writing, and the studies in literature ... are invaluable ... in themselves ... (but) fall short of their greatest possible good and are more or less loose and erratic ..." The criticism sounds very contemporary, and I fear we will hear it more often in the years to come. For Reed and Kellogg and today's lay public, grammar is both the "Science of Language." in particular the structure of sentences analyzed through diagramming, and the "Art of Expression" represented in Higher Lessons

as usage rules introduced in the latter part of the book under Parts of Speech. Reed and Kellogg were in many respects quite moderate; although they felt the need of usage rules, which they introduced under the label "cautions," they were not insensitive to changes in fashion and taste. For example, they give the "Caution" "An and a are different forms of one. An is used before vowel sounds. For the sake of euphony, an drops n and becomes a before consonant sounds," to which they add the footnote, "Some writers still use an before such words as historian, use, one; but present usage favors a."

I dwell on Reed and Kellogg because when our students' parents think of grammar, it is that amalgam of usage and grammar made popular by texts such as Higher Lessons. Most linguists would dismiss out of hand the claim in the "Preface" that the study of language through scientific principles, be they Reed-Kellogg's or Chomsky's, automatically insures improvement in writing. But linguists and the teachers they teach are but a small proportion of the people concerned with this question. Parents and public in general far exceed us in numbers and therefore in power. They believe Reed and Kellogg because they learned that view at an impressionable age. Studies indicate that when under pressure people regress to earlier learned strategies and beliefs. We see that operating here. No matter what linguists have taught the future teacher, no matter what the objective studies say about writing and grammar study, today's teachers, like the general public, were taught in elementary and secondary school that they would be better

writers if they "knew" grammar. Despite college courses about writing and language, under strong societal pressure, the English teacher reverts to this belief in the classroom, and is then willing to accept the blame for lower SAT scores and "poorer writing" heaped by the disgruntled parents and the popular press.

Through the 1930's and 1940's, English educators became considerably more accepting of the view that usage was really a matter of appropriateness. Different varieties of English were appropriate for different contexts. The English teacher's role was one of aiding students in expanding their range of language rather than replacing a native dialect with some ill defined standard English. This belief led to the accusation that we live in a permissive world where "anything goes," and some educators responded with a demand for a retightening of the prescriptive noose. In a College English article in October, 1953, Morton Bloomfield stated quite clearly that teachers were obligated to teach matters of usage because they were matters of value, not fact. He is concerned because "one hears over and over again, in the teaching and other professions, the wail that young people do not know how to read and write their own language." (p. 33) He argues for a prescriptivist approach, fixing the language,because "a relative stability could be (useful) in making for clarity, exactitude, and an understanding of the past. To slow down the rate of language change ... is a desirable goal." Bloomfield then lists four reasons for teaching presciptive rules. Archibald Hill, a linguist, counters with an article in the April, 1954, issue of College English, demonstrating the fallacies in Bloomfield's linguistic

knowledge and concluding with the statement that "Good style, whether artistic or intellectual, is possible in any language structure," and says that English teachers should be concerned with clarity in writing, not usage.

Within the classroom of the '50's Bloomfield's wishes went generally unheeded. Societal forces of some moment were at work, and the cry to continue prescriptivism was effectively drowned out by louder cries. Remember that 1954 was the first civil rights decision and that 1957 was the first sputnik. In line with these larger societal changes educational priorities changed dramatically. Suddenly we were more interested in science, so the educational emphasis turned strongly in that direction with a concomitant lessening of concern for the humanities. As the civil rights activists made inroads in the traditional classroom structure in the schools, emphasis shifted in the English classroom from concern with substantially different dialects, and from a relatively narrow focus on traditional literature to studies of popular contemporary literature, including ethnic literatures, as well as new topics such as communications and film. Educational concerns were broader in scope; they assumed that more was available to be learned, and that not all students shared the same cultural backgrounds. Time to cope with the nit-picking nature of usage could simply not be spared.

During this period, teacher training followed the development of grammatical theory, from traditional to structural to transformational grammar. Structural grammar was antithetical to usage concerns. No

structuralist I have read believes in "correct" usage. Transformational grammar simply didn't concern itself with anything so mundane as usage. Usage was discussed less and less as broader, more politically compelling issues of social dialectology were taught and researched. As long as the SAT scores remained high, as long as students had no trouble finding jobs, we teachers, teacher trainers, and scholars were allowed to pursue our course. However, once the job market started tightening up and inflation began to rise and the SAT scores to decline, we were called on the carpet -- we weren't teaching the basics, in this case, traditional grammar and usage. The U.S. News and World Report of October 15, 1979 says: "After years of experimentation and disappointment with new teaching methods, 'back to basics' will continue to be the watchword in many of the classrooms." They also predict that "demands will continue for a boost in standards. A national achievement test -- designed by the federal government for use as a model by states in minimum competency examinations -- is predicted by many educators." (p. 74)

Sociolinguistic research makes it clearer and clearer that questions of usage are trivial. Writing research indicates that the real writing problems have little to do with "refined" usage or knowledge of grammar, but the public demand is for us to quit fooling around and to make things right again, to go "back to the basics" in effect to ignore some fifty years of recent language study in favor of the belief in the "rightness of the old way." "Basics" in this case means traditional grammar and usage study. Works which present a strong case for maintaining the purity of standard print English, such as E. D. Hirsh's Philosophy of

Composition, give apparent scholarly support to the demand for the return to basics.

We can fight the demand, but effectively only in our classes. We do not have much influence over school boards or text selection committees. They will yield to community pressure, not to our pressure, so the traditional texts will reappear, and I foresee more students in our classes with a strong case of linguistic insecurity brought on because they "do not know the rules." I also see that we can use the demand to our advantage. We can construe "back to basics" to mean simply that our future students must be more knowledgeable about language. When we must teach units on grammar, we should be certain that students understand the difference between grammar and usage. We should be certain that they understand that grammar study helps them bring to consciousness knowledge of the unconscious grammatical rule system they already possess. We should teach usage as a sociolinguistic phenomenon and help them to see the interplay between prestigeous usage and economic power, help them to understand that nonprestige dialects are a function of social and economic classes, and continued use of such dialects is either the result of a lack of awareness of the importance of dialects in any society or is a conscious choice by the user to flout political opinion in favor of identification with a particular group of people. We are also compelled to teach the student the possible consequences of that choice.

Conservatism in the form of a demand for greater attention to usage is right to the extent that we are remiss in teaching our students

about language, no matter how well we perform our necessary task of teaching them to manipulate language. Take heart in the knowledge that the failure we teachers are accused of today was made in 1763, 1886, and 1953. In essence, our society, our culture, wants its students to be able to use language well, and it is giving us permission, indeed demanding, that our students be knowledgeable about language as well, a demand I as a linguist cannot disagree with.

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